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ABSTRACT

The case method seems particularly useful in helping college students to overcome anxiety about writing and even in persuading them that writing is a "real-world" skill that they can master just as they would any other skill. It has the further advantages of integrating reading and writing and of allowing students to develop and use problem-solving skills. Teachers also benefit from using the case method because having everyone write on the same topic allows them to plan prewriting exercises useful to all class members. Two kinds of cases can be used: the closed case, in which all the information is supplied; and the open case, in which students gather information themselves, either through group discussion and direct observation, or from newspapers and other library sources. With either kind of case, students have to react to a business problem or situation in writing. (The example of an open case method is used in the paper to illustrate the seven steps that constitute student prewriting activities when preparing a report.) (RL)

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FOCUSING ON INFORMATION:

USING THE CASE METHOD IN INTRODUCTORY BUSINESS WRITING

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FOCUSING ON INFORMATION:
USING THE CASE METHOD IN INTRODUCTORY BUSINESS WRITING

The case method has long been a valued teaching technique in schools of business, most prominently at Harvard University. While it has been used in many upper level business communications courses, it has been virtually ignored until recently in introductory writing courses, many of which continue to use a traditional approach to writing. Three books based on the case method have been published and more are planned. Because teachers will be called on to evaluate books using this approach to writing, we would like to discuss some of the advantages of using cases and to demonstrate how to use cases in the writing classroom.

ADVANTAGES OF THE CASE METHOD

Cases appeal both to students and teachers. Having become increasingly pragmatic, students respond well to cases. They regard their written responses to them as "real writing" because they are helping to solve a problem. Teachers like the case method also because it simplifies the task of planning meaningful activities which involve all the students.

The majority of our students are first or second semester freshmen. They know very little about business or about writing. Cases provide them with a subject and with

content. They don't have to invent topics nor do a great deal of library research to find subject matter. Thus, use of cases solves the first problem many beginning writers encounter: "What should I write about?" It also circumvents a problem common with teacher-assigned topics: "I don't know anything about that subject."

Another advantage of the case method is that it provides students with an audience so that they are no longer writing either to the teacher or to their classmates. The Diamond Jubilee case, for example, specifies that the writer, as head of the public relations department, is addressing Frederick Butler Taggert, the company president. Class discussion centers on the implications of writing directly to the company president. Since such a communication is outside the normal channels of communication, students realize it represents a great opportunity for the writer. They begin to see their report as a "real world" problem and to accept that their credibility rests on analysis and presentation of fact rather than on the teacher's predilictions.

Teachers also benefit from use of the case method. Because everyone is writing on the same topic, teachers can plan prewriting exercises which will be useful to all class members. Further, papers are much simpler to grade because accuracy and completeness are easy to check. Students and teachers are working from the same body of knowledge derived from the case itself and from class discussion.

The case method is the best simulation we can give students of a business problem. Like most business writing, it centers on gathering, analyzing, and organizing specific data. Its purpose is to communicate to a particular audience for a practical purpose. And it conveys information to assist in the decision-making process or to solve a business problem.

CLASSROOM USE

When we began using the case method in our freshman writing classes about seven years ago, we had to develop our own materials. Because we teach in a College of Business, our cases focus on business problems. This kind of case is appropriate not only for business students but also for those who have not decided on a college major. Most students vaguely expect some day to "get a job" and general business cases introduce them to the kind of writing they may have to do on the job.

Two kinds of cases emerged from our staff's efforts to produce business problems. The first kind of case is closed; i.e., all the information is supplied to students. The writing task is to select relevant information, to organize it, and to write a short report. The second kind of case is open. Students gather information themselves, either through group discussion or direct observation or from newspapers or other library resources. With either kind of case, students have to react to a business problem or situation in writing.

The Diamond Jubilee is an example of an open case. The situation described in the case is based loosely on a speech given by the public relations director of U.S. Steel's Gary Works in which he described preparations for the bicentennial celebration in 1976 and on a New York Times article on Cummins Engine of Columbus, Indiana.

Step one in every case, of course, is to read the case thoroughly. The Diamond Jubilee case, which follows, is an open case similar to others we have developed for use in introductory writing.

THE DIAMOND JUBILEE

Butler-Taggert, one of the big five machine tool manufacturers, started operations in Pocatawba 73 years ago when Fred Butler and Jack Taggert, two enterprising bicycle repairmen, began making their own tools in a shed behind Butler's father's house. Since its humble beginnings, the company has expanded and diversified. Five years ago, it added a nuclear components division. For the last 50 years, Butler-Taggert has been one of the chief employers in Pocatawba.

To celebrate the company's Diamond Jubilee, Frederick Butler Taggert III, the company president, has asked you, as head of the public relations department, to prepare a community-wide celebration. Taggert tells you that he wants you to use the Jubilee to raise the visibility of the company in the community by once again involving it in community affairs as it was involved in the time of his father.

Taggert wants also to enhance the company's reputation and to raise company morale through the Jubilee. B-T still attracts more applicants than it needs for jobs in its plant because of its high salary scale and liberal benefits plan. But the best graduates in communications, accounting, marketing, and engineering from the Pocatawba campus of the state university look for jobs in Chicago, Detroit, and other metropolitan areas. The community as a whole takes B-T for granted, Taggert feels, and is only aware of the company when management-labor relations get publicity or when environmentalists inspect the furnaces.

Taggert's main goal, however, is to provide lasting benefits to the community during the Jubilee year. He has remained a loyal son of Pocatawba. He and his children are graduates of the local schools. In fact, he serves on the boards of both the state university and of Pocatawba General Hospital. In her younger years, his daughter Joan was active in the Pocatawba Civic Theatre. His late wife was president of the Pocatawba Art Guild.

Although he has not yet discussed finances with you, Taggert has mentioned that he will expend both corporate and personal funds on a good program.

Write a report detailing areas where Butler-Taggert can make a contribution to the community. Family interests are a good starting point. You want to involve as many sectors of the Pocatawba community as possible.

A thorough reading of the case includes an understanding of terminology. What is a <u>diamond</u> jubilee? What

is a machine tool? What does raising the visibility of the company mean? What are lasting benefits? The last two questions lead to discussion of the special relationships that often exist between major employers and medium and small-sized communities. Every student from Kalamazoo or Battle Creek or Midland, Michigan, has a detail to add about Upjohn or Kellogg or Dow. Students are also disabused of erroneous notions during this discussion. For instance, the perennial suggestion to pass out liberal bonuses to employees is NOT a lasting benefit. By the same token, raffles are NOT a legal function for profit-making institutions.

The second step is to establish audience. Through close reading, the students eventually realize that they are not writing to the head of the public relations department or to themselves as head of the public relations department but to the company president. This step is important because it provides a focus for the rest of the paper.

The third step is to produce a thesis and a summary of ideas which will be major subdivisions of the paper. Students find the thesis fairly readily: to prepare a community-wide celebration. In summarizing the goals of the Jubilee, they list raising visibility, enhancing the company's reputation, raising morale, and providing lasting benefits to the community. Later they learn this is not the best classification, but the initial list of subdivisions takes them to the next pre-writing task.

The fourth step is to put students into groups and to ask them to list all of their ideas about how to reach these goals for the Jubilee. Since they usually experience uncertainty at this point, we go back to the case to look for key terms (e.g., diamond, tools, bicycle, state university, civic theater, art guild) on which to build ideas.

The fifth step is to pass out a combined list from all the notes student groups have produced in class. Although lists differ from class to class, a sample list looks like this:

1. hospital
2. library expansion
3. athletic fund
4. scholarships
5. awards for worker of the month
6. organize diamond jubilee parade
7. workers' raises-benefits
8. more funds into advertising
9. tours of company
10. Diamond Jubilee Day
    - contests
    - dances
11. career day
12. employee education
13. give special incentives to State U. grads to apply for work at B-T
14. provide internships to students at U. to work for B-T
15. build statue and dedicate to community
16. increase benefits for employees
17. 75% off tools purchased
18. equipment for hospital
19. special wing for hospital
20. display company products
21. Christmas pageant
22. sponsor art exhibit
23. food for needy
24. art gallery

25. weekly bulletin - company news
26. company benefits
27. sports, e.g., company softball team
28. "Employee of the Month" courtesy award
29. appraisal and counseling
30. credit union
31. Taggert blimp shaped like a hammer
32. donations to hospital, schools, library
33. public park featuring Pocatawba's history
34. hold an exhibition
35. bicycle marathon
36. theatre day for employees
37. make all employees members of civic theatre
38. start theatre and art programs in high school
39. give scholarships to children of employees at State U.
40. time capsule for community
41. swimming pool
42. community clean up with lunch
43. plant tour guided by retired workers
44. sports tournament
45. raffle to give away diamonds
46. memorial park with statues of Butler and Taggert
47. construct a baseball diamond
48. trip to Washington to see Hope Diamond
49. concert appearance of Neil Diamond
50. trip for two to Diamond Head
51. Carol Channing to sing "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend"
52. Play about how business started--comedy
53. design a tool symbolizing jubilee

The whole class talks about which ideas are feasible to turn in to the company president. For example, items 1-4 are general and can be replaced by other items on the list. Item 29 doesn't seem to mean anything and, in fact, doesn't mean anything in relation to this case, according to the student who was queried about it. Item 31 seems bizarre, but the student was thinking of the hot air balloons Kellogg owns. His idea was useful with some modifiation: most students felt the hammer was not the best or most friendly symbol. Items 16, 26, and 30 were deleted because, as another student noted, the company already has a liberal benefits plan. Item 17, 75 percent off all tools purchased during the jubilee year, was rejected as not cost effective. Everybody approved of items 47-53 which several students later used as a central theme in their reports.

The sixth step is categorizing. The students find almost immediately that two categories, enhancing the company's reputation and raising visibility, overlap and that they need to delete visibility because reaching any of the other three goals raises visibility. Once over this hurdle, two other problems confront students. They have more information than they know what to do with, and they think a single correct answer exists. "What do I put first" is a common question. They finally learn they must look at the report as a whole to see where the parts fit in.

The seventh step, synthesis, is the hardest. After they have categorized the items, they rush to closure.

They resist eliminating ideas that are all right in themselves but don't fit a general plan, and they dislike expanding on ideas that need further explanation.

In-class work on this case replicates the transactions that take place in any writing task involving more than one person. Some students hang on to pet ideas against all comers. Others begin to see the project taking a general shape and rush to eliminate ideas without giving explanations for their reasoning. Still others get carried away with ideas and lose sight of their purpose in writing. Working with this case requires constant reference to the goals that the company president has set. Thus, a general idea like "build a park" finally becomes build a theme park, similar to Greenfield Villiage, which shows the history of the company. Likewise, Carol Channing doesn't just sing, she is grand marshal of the kickoff parade and sings several songs at a community concert.

When they have gone through all seven steps, students have finished the pre-writing work of this case. Since many of them find synthesis so difficult, however, we sometimes add another step--writing sample paragraphs on transparencies for class critique. The production of a few models allays their final fears and helps them into the final writing process.

Without overselling it, the case method seems particularly useful in helping students to overcome anxiety about writing and even in persuading them that writing is a real-world skill which they can master just as they would any

other skill. It has the further advantages of integrating reading and writing and of allowing students to develop and use problem-solving skills.